

## County Council Divided On Addiction Outreach

*Some See Progress; Others Question Cost*

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Drunken men and panhandlers have long cast a shadow over commercial districts in the Long Branch, Takoma Park and Langley Park areas.

In the spring, Montgomery County launched a pilot program to help clear them from the area by hiring three outreach workers who provide information about substance abuse treatment and offer to take people to a county facility where they can sleep while they sober up.

Six months into the program,

which received \$310,000 and was shepherded by Montgomery County Council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), the effort is getting mixed reviews, with some council members questioning whether it's a worthwhile use of tax dollars.

Since they hit the streets in April, the outreach workers have had 831 interactions with people who were intoxicated in public or otherwise perceived as a nuisance, according to a report presented recently to council members. Out of the targeted population, 28 people

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## Addiction Outreach Program Has Worked Well, County Police Say

agreed to be taken to "detox beds." Twenty of those were admitted into a short-term detoxification program. Nine signed up for longer-term treatment.

Leventhal and other county offi-

cials say they are encouraged by the early results of the program.

"These are potentially people who have never been reached before by traditional addiction services," said Dudley E. Warner, a Department of Health and Human Services senior administrator who

oversees the program. "This was the first six months of this. We think this is a prominent start."

Council member Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large), who has experience treating people with substance abuse problems, said long-term treatment programs would be a wiser investment.

"To have a real effect on the course of addiction, it's not a matter of getting someone into a detox bed," she said at a Nov. 1 council meeting. "It's getting them into that bed and being able to expand the treatment. . . . I'm not sure that in the long run, this is going to do anything else other than just taking people off the streets temporarily."

Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) echoed Trachtenberg's concern about the scarcity of long-term treatment services, while noting that the program has had a positive effect on the targeted districts.

"People should be able to walk down the street without the smell of urine and without harassing behavior," Elrich said. "But I also share the concern that simply having people move on is not enough."

County police officials say the

program has worked well. Being intoxicated in public is not a crime in Maryland, unlike in Virginia and other jurisdictions. Begging for money on the street is also legal. In the past, Assistant Police Chief Betsy Davis said, business owners would call police to report that intoxicated people and homeless people sleeping under awnings of stores were hurting their businesses.

"Unless they were drinking in public," which is a crime, Davis said, "there was not much enforcement action we could take. It would tie us down."

In cases where people had passed out, the only thing officers could typically do was call for an ambulance so they could be taken to an emergency center, Davis said.

Another benefit of the program, as winter approaches, is that the outreach workers will have become acquainted with homeless people who might need to be prodded to seek shelter, Davis said. Last year, six people died from hypothermia in the county.

James Lightfoot, an emergency center doctor at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park, e-

mailed Leventhal recently, praising the program.

The initiative "has reduced the number of visits of many of our chronic [alcoholics] who come in every day," the doctor wrote.

The three outreach workers, who work for the county's Department of Health and Human Services, are on the street between 2 p.m. and midnight Monday through Saturday. More than 85 percent of the 831 interactions the team has had have been with Latinos, according to the legislative report council members got this month. More than 96 percent have been with males. The prevailing reason for contact, prompting 60 percent of cases, is public intoxication.

Dudley said language barriers haven't been a significant obstacle because one of the outreach workers speaks Spanish and most of the people they encounter speak at least some English.

There are no imminent plans to expand the initiative to other parts of the county, although some officials say Wheaton residents have expressed interest in seeing it there.